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ABSTRACT

Gifted rural middle school students in Douglas County, Nevada, participated in a leadership program which complemented an existing critical and creative thinking skill-based program. Assessment, teacher-directed lessons, student-directed activities, integration of leadership techniques into creative and critical thinking strategies, and on-going evaluation of student progress were used. Students completed a Likert scale questionnaire describing 20 group problem solving situations adopted from the Blake/Mouton Managerial Grid. Students led other students through audiotaped problem solving situations related to common social or school experiences, then reviewed, analyzed, and evaluated their own sessions in conference with the resource teacher. Students became familiar with 20 leadership task and maintenance skills through lecture, discussion, and audio-identification sessions. Results of post-tests, subjective evaluation, and integration of leadership skills into existing learning strategies led to continuation of the leadership component of the Academically Talented Program. (LFL)

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LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR GIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT

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RURAL ASPECTS OF THE DOUGLAS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Douglas County School District is the fourth largest school district in the state of Nevada. School district enrollment is over 4,000 students, K-12, and is still growing. Students are housed in eight schools which are located at Lake Tahoe and in the Carson Valley (4,750 feet above sea level). Douglas County offers semi-rural living with the convenience of nearby metropolitan centers.

Douglas County's population tripled from 1970 to 1980. It was the fastest-growing Nevada county during that time. Its population in 1985 stood at 25,000, the fourth greatest in the state. More than one-third of the population is in Minden, the county seat, and adjacent Gardnerville. Twenty percent of the population lives at Lake Tahoe, the county's western border. Genoa, at the foot of the eastern Sierra, is the oldest settlement in the state.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS FOR GIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

IN A RURAL ENVIRONMENT

The term "leadership" first became a part of the English vernacular around 1800. But it was not been until the last 40 years that social scientists and researchers have explored the importance and effect of leadership skills in group interaction. As one assumes a role requiring leadership skills, the individual must choose the type of leadership style that will enhance group problem solving and also complement one's interpersonal skills (Gordon,1979). Development of leadership styles and techniques has been discussed, for the most part, in its relationship to business, industry and most recently to educational administration. But exactly what role do leadership skills play in the classroom, more specifically, in a class of Academically Talented Middle School students who live in a rural area of Nevada ?

Public Law 95-561 (November 1978), outlines five areas of giftedness: 1) intellectual ability, 2) specific academic aptitude, 3) creative and performing arts, 4) creative and productive thinking, and 5) leadership. National trends regarding school district selection of gifted students seem to focus largely on intellectual ability and/or academic

aptitude. States, such as, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and North Carolina recognize students gifted in art, music and drama through the Governor's Honors Schools of the Performing Arts. These school are offered primarily during the summer months to students who have been selected by their districts or intermediate units. Selection criteria varies from state to state. Students from grade ten and eleven are afforded opportunities to make application for a specific talent area. Creative thinking abilites are often assessed by the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking or similar measurements such as those developed by Frank Williams or J.P. Guilford. Creative thinking is generally a component of most gifted program whether by the implementation of Creative Problem Solving (Parnes), Future Problem Solving (Torrance) ,Lateral Thinking (deBono), or related activities. For the most part, few gifted program identify students gifted in leadership or incorporate leadership skills into their present gifted curricula. It is often assumed that gifted students/children will move ahead in social, as well as academic/intellectual setting (Willings, 1983); however, this is not always the case. Often times, these students are not able to convey their knowledge and insights to peers and adults in a positive manner.

With this in mind, two groups of gifted middle school students in Douglas County, Nevada, participated in a leadership program which complemented the critical and creative thinking skill-based program already in place (Fig. 1a and 1b). The purpose of the adjunct program was to develop and enhance leadership skills through assessment techniques providing baseline data for each participant, teacher-directed lessons, student-directed activities and evaluation, integration of leadership techniques into creative and critical thinking strategies, and on-going evaluation of student progress.

Briefly, the leadership component required Academically Talented students to:

1. identify strengths and weaknesses within their own leadership style through assessment techniques and self-evaluation
2. identify task/maintenance behaviors in their own leadership styles as well as the leadership styles of others
3. enhance leadership skills by roleplaying problem solving situations where they (the student) are the group leader (audio taping)
4. evaluate the audio tape of their leadership role and identify strengths and weaknesses

5. identify two areas for improvement
6. practice skills in isolated roleplay situations and critical and creative thinking strategies
7. re-evaluate progress through self analysis and post test assessment data

Without introduction or discussion, students were asked to complete a Likert scale questionnaire which described twenty group problem solving situations. Each question began with the phrase, "If I were a member of a problem solving group..." Each question corresponded to a specific task (getting the job done) or maintenance (awareness of group interaction) skills. The questionnaire and interpretation grid was an adaptation of the Blake/Mouton Managerial Grid developed at Ohio State University in 1964. Though other grids and questionnaires were available for use, such as, the Reddin Three Dimensional Grid (1977), the Guilford-Halley Leadership Inventory (1963) and the Ideal Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (1974), the adapted version of the Blake Mouton seemed to present situtations to which a middle school student could easily relate. The grid/questionnaire is based on the combination of task and maintenance behaviors. An example to explain the scoring interpretation might be, 10/1 (high task-low maintenance) or 1-10 (low task-high maintenance) .

Figures 2 and 3 describe the grid and leadership qualities.

Student scores were computed and placed on the leadership grid . Following the baseline data gathering phase, students were required to lead other students through a problem solving situation which related to common social or school experiences. Each roleplay situation was audio-taped. Individual student conferences were arranged for the student and the resource teacher to listen to and discuss the tape as well as to review the results of the pre-test. Students were able to analyze and evaluate the data and identify areas of strength and weakness. With this knowledge, students were now able to key-in on a task and maintenance skills which they chose to develop or enhance.

During the next several class periods, students became familiar with the twenty task and maintenance skills through lecture, discussion and audio-identification sessions. Group discussion also elaborated on alternative methods of approaching group interaction in pre-determined role play and everyday real life situations. The middle school students continued to refine and re-evaluate their progress through the initial questionnaire acting as a post test and through subjective evaluation. More importantly, these new skills were able to be integrated into strategies already

present in the Academically Talented Program implemented in Douglas County.

There are plans to continue the leadership program during the next school year. In addition to the development of vital social skills , the program provided the students with an opportunity to get to know themselves from a new perspective.

The program appears to have implications for the regular classroom structure, perhaps not through formalized instruction but quite possibly through classroom management techniques and the development of social skills through group work, assignment of responsibilities or the resolution of classroom problems. Society believes that decision making is a right of all its citizens. However, in reality it appears to be the right of leaders within selected organizations. Practice and theory are at odds.Therefore, it appears that the educational system has an obligation to train students in these skills and techniques if decision making and problem solving are to be mutually beneficial within the leader-group scenario(Gordon,1979).

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DOUGLAS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT
ACADEMICALLY TALENTED PROGRAM

FIGURE I-A

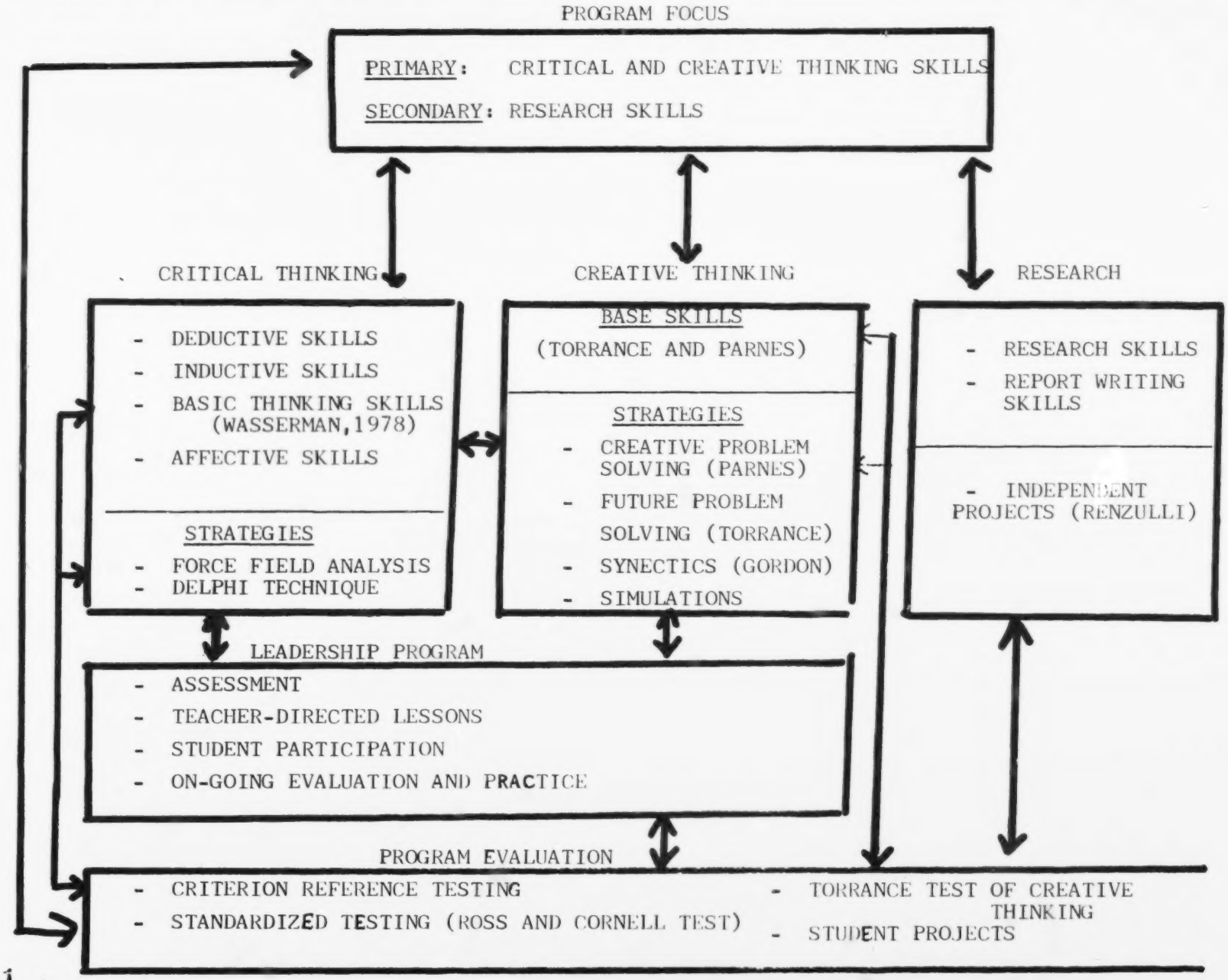


Fig. 1-B

GOALS

- Student self-awareness
- Basic knowledge of leadership skills and leadership types
- Opportunities for student development and enhancement of leadership skills

ASSESSMENT

- Pre-test (questionnaire)
- Audio-taping (self-evaluation)
- Post test (questionnaire)

STRATEGIES

- Group discussions
- Lecture
- Roleplay activities
- Audio-taping
- Questionnaires
- Practice skills in critical and creative thinking strategies
  a. Creative and Future Problem Solving
  b. Delphi-technique
  c. Force Field Analysis

Fig. 2

Concerned about group members

Assumes a protecting role

Deadlines and the final product are rarely met

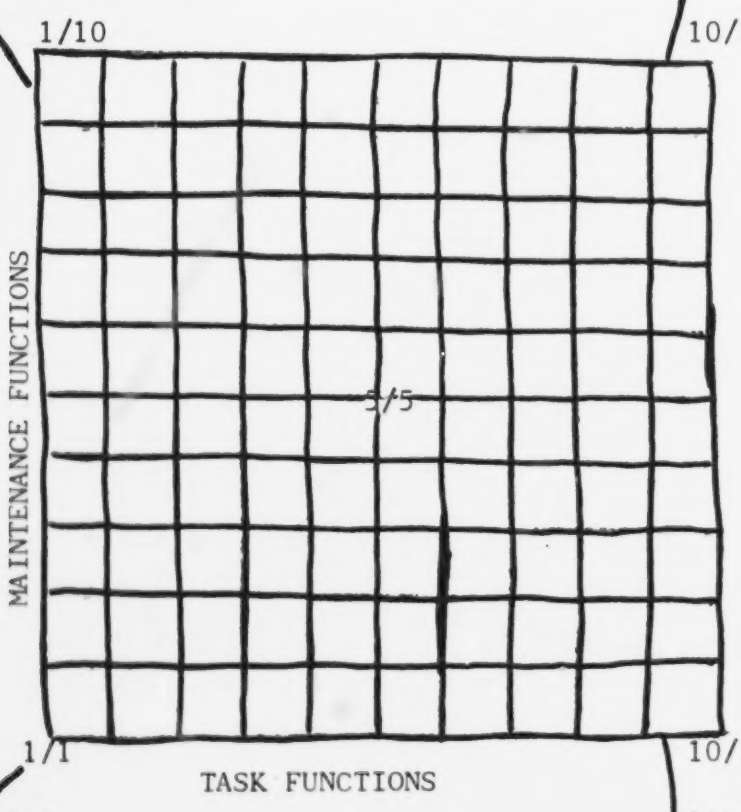
Little direct guidance for the group

Avoids criticizing ideas

Focuses maximum concern for both the task and the group

Nurtures group contributions

Maintains his leadership role by sharing authority



Self-defensive

Avoids risks

Does not trust group members

Likes to work alone

Evaluation of the group's ideas are dominated by the leader

Sometimes autocratic

Imposes ideas and methods on others

Concerned about accomplishing the task

TASK JNCTIONS

INFORMATION AND OPINION GIVER: Offers ideas which enhance group discussion

INFORMATION AND OPINION SEEKER: Requests and considers the opinions of other group members

STARTER: Initiates interaction among group members by setting group goals

DIRECTION GIVER: Sets the focus for the group

SUMMARIZER: Pulls group ideas together

COORDINATOR: Pulls ideas of group members together by finding commonalities among ideas

DIAGNOSER: Points out difficulties the group has in completing the task

ENERGIZER: Encourages higher quality of work from group members

QUALITY TESTER: Tests ideas on their workability

EVALUATOR: Compares decisions and accomplishments of the group with the group's original goals

MAINTENANCE FUNCTIONS

ENCOURAGER OF PARTICIPATION: Warmly encourages group members

HARMONIZER AND COMPROMISER: Persuades group members to analyze and evaluate their responses to reconcile differences

TENSION RELIEVER: Suggests fun approaches to the problem solving situation. Uses humor

COMMUNICATION HELPER: Strengthens communication among group members

EVALUATOR OF EMOTIONAL CLIMATE: Asks others how they feel about the workings of the group

PROCESS OBSERVER: Examines problem solving process and reviews its effectiveness

STANDARD SETTER: Expresses goals to make all members of the group aware of group production and progress

ACTIVE LISTENER: Shows interest in the comments of others by often rephrasing their ideas for clarification

TRUST BUILDER: Accepts and supports the openness of other group members. Encourages risk-taking and individuality

INTERPERSONAL PROBLEM SOLVER: Attempts to resolve conflicts within the groups which deviate from the problem at hand.

Author unknown

Fig. III